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Women and Alcohol

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Action on Women's Addictions –
Research & Education

ARF Addiction Research Foundation
Fondation de la recherche sur la toxicomanie

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ALCOHOL IS A DRUG

Many people don't think of alcohol as a drug. But consider this: drugs can affect the way you think, act and feel. Some drugs change your mood, and some are painkillers. Alcohol does all of these things, so it is a drug.

THE PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL ON WOMEN

The same amount of alcohol affects a woman more than a man. This is because women have less water in their bodies than men. So alcohol is less watered down in women's bodies. Alcohol also does *more* physical damage to women *more quickly* than it does to men.

Over time, too much alcohol can cause serious health problems, such as damage to your liver, heart, stomach and brain. Heavy drinking may also increase the risk of menstrual problems or some forms of cancer.

You are more likely to develop these problems if you also smoke cigarettes.

Pregnancy

Alcohol passes through your bloodstream and into the baby (or fetus). Alcohol can affect how the fetus develops. *No one knows if there's a safe amount you can drink when you're pregnant.* But the more heavily you drink, the more you're likely:

- to have a baby that is very small (underweight)
- to have a baby with physical or mental health problems
- to lose the baby or fetus (have a miscarriage)
- to have a baby that is still-born (born dead).

No one knows how much is safe to drink when you're pregnant. Less is better. None is best!

The father's drinking may affect his sperm. No one knows yet what effect that may have on the fetus or the baby. The father's drinking can affect *you* too. It may be harder for you not to drink, or to drink very little, if your partner is drinking heavily.

Breast-feeding

If you're breast-feeding, you want the best for your baby. And breast-feeding is one of the best things you can do for your baby. But a little bit of any alcohol you drink passes into your breast milk. People disagree about the amount that can cause problems. It depends on how much and when you drink. Anything more than an occasional drink is not recommended.

If you drink regularly and breast-feed, that can affect how well the baby reacts to the world around him or her (this is called "psychomotor development"). Heavy drinking can also affect your "letdown" — the flow of milk into your nipples so the baby can feed.

If you do drink alcohol before you breast-feed, your baby will not drink as much of your milk, and he or she will sleep more often, but for a shorter time.

So try not to drink an hour or so *before* you breast-feed. If you have a drink right *after* you breast-feed, your body has more time to get rid of the alcohol before the next feeding time.

Talk with your doctor about the risks to your baby's health before you decide what to do. And remember: it's not just your baby's health that's a concern, it's *yours* too.

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

It can be dangerous to drink if you take some other drugs at the same time or close together. This includes prescription drugs, drugs you can buy at the drugstore without a prescription, and illegal drugs. Always check with your pharmacist or doctor first. Find out if it's safe to drink when you take any other drugs.

Drugs that increase the effect of alcohol

Many medications slow down, or sedate, your body. This is also something that alcohol does. Combining alcohol with these drugs can be very dangerous. It can cause difficulty with breathing. It can slow your thinking and make you lose your

concentration. You could pass out (lose consciousness) or possibly die. Some of these drugs are:

• **Barbiturates.** These are very powerful drugs, and they can be dangerous. Some, like Seconal® or Tuinal®, aren't prescribed very often. There are safer medications available that can be used instead. Another, Fiorinal®, is still prescribed. Never drink alcohol and take barbiturates.

• **Benzodiazepines.** Examples of these drugs that are commonly prescribed are Valium®, Ativan® and Halcion®. It's very important to drink nothing or very, very little if you're taking any of these medications — *check with your doctor.*

• **Codeine.** You get this medication by prescription (examples are Tylenol® 2s or 3s, and 282®s) or over-the-counter from the pharmacist (examples are Tylenol® 1s and 222®s). Check with your doctor or pharmacist about whether you can drink at all when you're taking this medication.

• **Antihistamines.** These drugs are often taken for allergies and cold symptoms. Examples are Benadryl® or Contac-C®. Another antihistamine, often taken for nausea, is Gravol®. Again, check with your doctor or pharmacist about whether you can drink at all when you're taking antihistamines.

Also be careful if you drink alcohol and take:

• **Painkillers.** You can buy some painkillers without a prescription, like ASA or Advil®. Alcohol combined with some painkillers can damage your stomach lining. This can cause stomach bleeding.

• **Antidepressants.** These drugs, such as Prozac® and Elavil®, are usually prescribed to relieve depression. Doctors usually advise people taking these medications not to drink.

• **Antibiotics.** These are drugs used to fight infections. Examples are penicillin and tetracycline. Some antibiotics don't work as well when combined with alcohol.

Are there alternatives?

Find out more about the medications you're taking. Some problems respond best to drugs. Sometimes even for these problems, you can cut down on the amount of the drugs you take. But *first*, ask your doctor if cutting down is safe.

For some problems, other things can help. If you're having uncomfortable feelings, you could go for a walk, have a massage or talk with a friend. If you're having trouble sleeping, you could have a warm bath, a glass of warm milk, or some herbal tea without caffeine.

WOMEN AND SAFE DRINKING

Alcohol *can* be used safely. People drink for many reasons — maybe to socialize, to feel good, to relax.

Alcohol can seem harmless. It's legal and easy to buy. Many people drink, and most people who drink cautiously don't develop problems. For women past menopause, a drink every other day may even help prevent heart problems. But there are other ways of preventing heart problems. So this doesn't mean that you should start having a drink every other day if you usually drink less than this. And it doesn't mean you should

start drinking if you don't drink at all now. Talk about it with your doctor.

Remember that alcohol is a drug, and drugs have to be treated with respect. The following are some recommended guidelines for safer drinking. But remember, even the following amount of drinking can be too much for you if you:

- are under-age
- are older
- are pregnant, or breast-feeding
- have a small body build
- have physical or mental health problems
- take any other drugs
- are driving a vehicle, or operating any other machinery
- have had problems with alcohol or other drugs in the past.

1. Know how much alcohol is in a drink.

There is the same amount of alcohol in:

- 1 beer (regular strength)
- 1 five-ounce glass of table wine
- 1 wine cooler
- 1 three-ounce glass of sherry
- 1 1/2 ounces of liquor, liqueur or brandy.

2. Don't drink every day.

There should be at least one day a week when you don't drink at all. This is especially important for women. Women's bodies are harmed more, and more quickly, by alcohol than men's.

3. On days that you do drink, don't drink more than one to two drinks a day.
This might not seem like very much, but remember: alcohol has more effect on women's bodies than on men's.

HOW ALCOHOL AFFECTS YOUR FEELINGS

Alcohol affects how you think and feel. Small amounts of alcohol might make you feel happy, relaxed and self-confident. But drinking too much can make you feel sad, upset or angry.

Or small amounts of alcohol might dull painful feelings. But drinking won't change the problems behind those feelings. It can even make problems worse.

ALCOHOL AND STRESS IN WOMEN'S LIVES

Some women are unhappy with important parts of their lives, but aren't able to change them. They may want children but not have any, or not want children but have them. They may want a paid job but not have one, or not like the job they're in. They may want a relationship, but not be in one, or not be happy with the relationship they are in. Some women drink or use other drugs to try to cope with the stress they feel as a result. Some of these women develop problems.

And some women have extra stresses in their lives. You may be more likely to use alcohol to cope if:

- you have ever been sexually, physically or emotionally assaulted or abused

- you have a partner, parent or child who is a heavy drinker or drug user
- you, or someone you care for, has a physical or mental health problem
- you have an important loss in your life (someone close to you dies, a relationship ends, you move, you retire from or lose a job, your children leave home)
- you are living on the street
- you have experienced discrimination because you are a native woman
- you have experienced discrimination because you are a lesbian or bisexual woman.

Some situations can make you feel out of control. So you might start drinking to cope. But drinking won't solve your problems. It may make them worse. If you already drink regularly, drinking more to cope with stress can even cause new problems, with money, health or relationships. Too much drinking can make you feel depressed and helpless to change difficult situations.

Try to take care of yourself, even if sometimes you don't feel like it. Ask for help when you need it. You're important!

OTHER PEOPLE'S DRINKING

How other people drink can affect you too. You are more likely to drink or take other drugs if your parents, partner or friends do. You can have problems if you have:

• **parents who are heavy drinkers or drug users.**
Children often learn about alcohol and other drugs by watching their parents. Children whose parents drink heavily or use other drugs often have problems, even after they grow up.

• **a partner or husband who is a heavy drinker or drug user.**
You might try to hide their behavior. So you end up with all the responsibilities. Or you try to control their drinking, so you drink more to leave less alcohol for them. Or you drink to keep them company.

• **an abusive partner or husband.**
Abuse can take place without alcohol and other drugs. But it often happens when a partner or husband is a heavy drinker or drug user. And the violence may be worse when they're drinking or using. If you drink too, that can make it harder or you to recognize the abuse. It can make it harder to protect yourself in an abusive situation.

WOMEN AND DRINKING PROBLEMS

You might find that you're drinking more, or more often, than the guidelines for safer drinking mentioned earlier. Or you may "binge" — drink a lot sometimes, and only a little or not at all in between those times. Either can cause problems, for you and for other people. You may find that you can't get

along without alcohol, that you are dependent on it. It's easy to become dependent on alcohol without even knowing it.

It can be difficult to admit to yourself and others that you have a problem. Many people don't understand the reasons why women have drinking problems. People often judge women with drinking problems more harshly than men. Some people don't want to admit that a woman they know has a drinking problem. Sometimes they want her to keep the problem hidden. So these women often don't get the support they need.

But remember: any woman can have a problem with alcohol.

Don't let other people's attitudes get in your way. You may feel afraid or embarrassed, but don't let that stop you from getting the help you need. You are not alone. You deserve help. You're worth it!

LOOKING FOR SUPPORT

There are places to go for support if your drinking is causing you problems. It's never too early or too late to get help. Many women have had drinking problems. And they have found the support they need. You can do it, too! Talk to someone you trust. Contact the organizations shown below:

Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario (ARF)
33 Russell Street, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S1
1-800-463-6273
(or check the white pages for your local ARF office)

Drug and Alcohol Registry of Treatment of Ontario
(DART) 1-800-565-8603

AWARE (Action on Women's Addictions
— Research and Education)
P.O. Box 86, Kingston, Ontario K7L 4V6
1-613-545-0117

Or check the Yellow Pages of your phone book under "A" for Addictions. Sometimes you can talk with a female counsellor, if you're more comfortable with a woman.

There are also mutual-help groups in many communities. These include Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Women for Sobriety (WFS)

And the Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario has a self-help book called *Saying When*. You can use this book on your own at home to quit or cut down on your drinking. Call 1-800-661-1111 to find out how to order the book.

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